To cite this output:
Marnoch, Gordon (2008). An exploratory study of parliamentarians and their use of healthcare performance metrics.The Scottish Parliament Health and Community Care Committee: Full Research Report, ESRC End of Award Report, RES-153-27-0008. Swindon: ESRC
REFERENCE No. RES-153-27-0008

Report

Background

The desire to codify and enumerate performance in the form of metrics has been a defining feature of the last two decades of public services governance. The study addresses questions related to the oversight of public services:

1. Are parliamentarians as end-users completing a managerialist policy cycle, in which metrics derived oversight complements rationalist/calculative approaches to policy making and implementation elsewhere?
2. Performance metrics are of significance for the democratic process, but what sort of instrumental purpose is behind their use by parliamentarians conducting oversight?
3. Is use made by parliamentarians of extensive sets of performance metrics relating to public services, reversing a long term trend in the United Kingdom where power, in circumstances of increasing policy complexity, has been concentrated in the executive?

The term 'performance metrics' refers to measures of performance, such as indicators, targets, ratios, league tables or benchmarks, which are used to assess and monitor health and community care services. Performance metrics are available to parliamentarians in many different forms including evaluations, annual reports, audits and budget-related performance information. There are in circulation over 2000 performance metrics which relate to the NHS and community care activities.

The extent to which elected representatives actually use performance metrics is little known. Explanations as to the institutional-behavioural dynamics informing performance metrics use by parliamentarians are more or less absent from the parliamentary studies literature. The public services literature includes a number of relevant studies, but is generally negative about the impact of performance metrics on oversight. Pollitt (2005) concluded that use of performance metrics is patchy and seldom highly valued by politicians. Van de Walle & Boivard (2007) found little evidence of strong interest in metrics from politicians. The review of empirical evidence conducted as part of the current study retrieved seven articles which met the twin search criteria of being concerned with oversight and having generated new empirical data on the use of performance metrics by elected representatives.[1]

The results reported in the seven studies are complex and only one study reported high use of performance metrics by elected representatives, the other researchers finding limited or low use. Scrutiny of the research designs used in these studies strongly indicated that a means of identifying tangible evidence of 'use' was of key importance. The importance of the 'context' of metrics use in oversight was also indicated in the literature, suggesting that policy and institutional circumstances were likely to feature heavily as factors influencing user behaviour. In terms of research design four important conclusions were drawn with respect to the current study. Firstly the study should focus on a parliamentary committee with a clearly defined membership and for which a reliable record of meetings was available. Secondly the study should avoid reliance on self-reporting of use by parliamentarians, either in questionnaires or interviews, since for various reasons this is liable to be inaccurate

[1] ESRC Public Services programme DP0809

and suffer from disappointing response rates. Instead content analysis of transcripts should be used to provide data. Interviews should be conducted with selected subjects after an account of user behaviour had been established. Thirdly the study must be longitudinal if it is intended to analyse the context in which use takes place. Lastly the content analysis must employ classifications of use which are as near universal as possible, if a comparative study is to be designed on the basis of the current study.

Objectives

The study was designed to address a detailed set of questions related to user behaviour summarized below as follows.

Objective A: When do MSPs use metrics?

1. Determine the discursive and transactional context of use.
2. Determine the transactional context of use
3. Are metrics used on a regularized basis?
4. Do MSPs have 'favourite' metrics?
5. Is use associated with media coverage of an issue?
6. Enumerate usage.

Objective B: Who uses metrics?

1. Who employed performance reference?
2. Determine associations between use of metrics and MSP characteristics.

Objective C: What types of metric are used?

1. Categorise the source, form and subject matter metrics used.
2. Are 'consumer choice' metrics favoured?

Objective D: Why do MSPs use metrics?

1. Discover the extent of usage in relation to constituency matters?
2. Are metrics used in extra parliamentary discursive forums and referred to in Committee business?
3. Is there evidence of partisan party political positions formed on the basis of metrics?
4. Do political parties have distinctive purposes in using metrics?
5. Identify purposes, e.g. supporting an argument, as the basis for question, opportunistic as 'political ammunition'?

Objective E: How are metrics used?

1. Does 'discursive' deliberation' take place around metrics?
2. Are metrics employed in 'transactional' work such as the scrutiny of a bill?
3. Are metrics used as part of a policy 'jigsaw' or considered on their own terms?

Objective F: To what effect?

1. Are there metrics informed decisions or other outputs for example reports.
2. Identify evidence of an enlightenment effect related to the use of metrics over the years 1999-2007?

See results section for evidence relating to objectives A1 – F2.

Methods

The study involved a content analysis of official records of the Scottish Parliament Health and Community Care Committee (hereafter referred to as the 'Committee') meetings and a series of in-depth elite actor interviews. The Scottish Parliament keeps a verbatim transcript of all committee meetings unless the item under consideration is deemed to be best discussed in private. In reality very few private sessions are held. Following a preliminary examination of the meetings held in 1999 and 2000 in which alternatives were trialed, a classification scheme was established to record data relating to the uses of performance metrics observed.

The study was conceived around an inclusive definition of 'use'. By this it is meant that any occasion when a Committee member made an intervention which referred to a performance metric would be recorded as a use. A more prescriptive approach might only have recorded precise references to data contained in named sets of metrics. This it is felt would fail to take account of the different purposes which parliamentarians have in using performance metrics. The mark-up process was conducted manually, there being no discernable means of identifying key words which would accurately identify uses of performance metrics. Basic software tools for searching the marked up/coded transcripts have proved to be valuable in subsequent analysis.

The examples given below illustrate the terms employed in categorizing usage. (Purpose of metrics related intervention, the witness to which the question was directed, the type of metric employed (input/output/outcome) and the source of the metric).

Firstly a record was kept of occasions when a Committee member made a minuted intervention on the basis of a figure derived from a specific set of metrics:

> Question to a witness from Scottish Executive Health Department:
>
> 'I am really asking how you know that the target is achievable if the current audits are prospective and will not be evaluated until 2005. You have set a target that 'the maximum wait from urgent referral to treatment for all cancer cases is no more than 2 months by 2005'? (Session 2 2003. Output metric. Source: Government)

A record was also kept of uses which made reference to a set of metrics but did not actually quote a specific number, percentage or ranking:

> Question to a doctor representing an oncology research centre:
>
> 'We talked to patient representatives this morning who were passionate about the unacceptable waiting times that people have to endure before they get access to a scanner and about the tremendous pressure on consultants'. (Session 1 2002. Output metric. Source: Government)

Where a member made a request for a set of metrics relating to an issue under discussion a record was kept:

> Question to Minister for Health:
>
> ' …. so I will ask what measurements there are in relation to the budget to demonstrate that the Arbuthnott policy is effective and that you are getting the outcomes that were projected when you chose to implement the policy'. (Session 2 2003. Outcome metric. Source: Government)

Members often challenged the basis of performance metrics under discussion in meetings, for example when a government minister addressed the committee or when a report was under review:

> Question to a Chair of a health board:
>
> 'Under community planning, different organizations will measure different things. I worry that, because there is no guidance, every association will have different headings. Bodies may pick out whatever has been positive and has had good outcomes, in order to produce a glossy document. I would like to think that community planning would have a substantial positive effect, but I cannot get a grip on what we are measuring and how we are doing that'. (Session 1 2002. Outcomes metrics. Source: Community Planning Partnership -health boards and local authorities).

Lastly a record was kept of occasions when a member asked for an explanation to be provided on the basis upon which a performance metric was collected or presented:

> Question to witness from Scottish Association for Mental Health:
>
> 'Did you want to test the accuracy of the figure of 50 per cent that is used by Dr Coia? (The clinical effectiveness of neurosurgery for mental disorder NMD) (Session 2 2002. Outcome metric: Source: Government/evidence based medicine literature review)

Having established 'case law on what constituted a use of performance metrics, the marked up reports of committee meetings have been re-examined to verify the inclusion of each separate instance of use in the scores kept.[2]

In-depth interviews with current and past members of the Committee, explored key factors influencing user behaviour. Interviews were conducted on the basis of knowledge of the member's user history. Interviews were also conducted with officials in the Scottish Parliament, House of Commons and Welsh Assembly, audit agency staff and civil servants in an effort gain a sense of perspective. In total twelve Committee members, seven parliament/assembly officers, two audit agency officials, two civil servants and two interest group officers were interviewed.

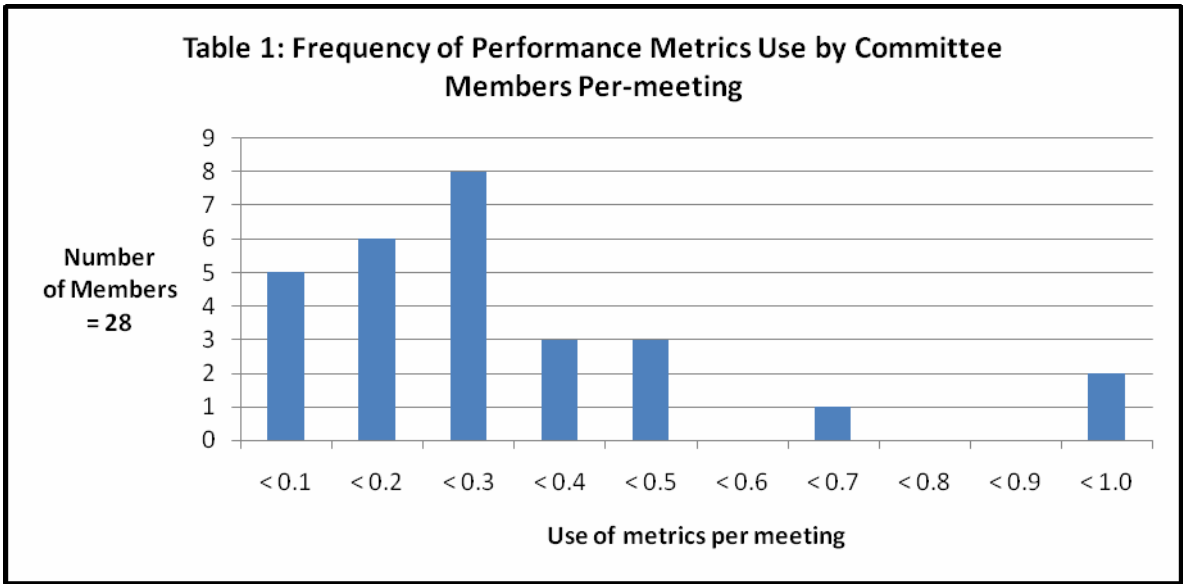
Results

[2] A third PSP Discussion Paper (in preparation) provides a full account of criteria for inclusion.

The findings are based on a content analysis of official reports of 232 Committee meetings which took place between the years 1999-2007 and interviews. The Committee had a total of 28 members between the commencement of Session One in May 1999 and the completion of Session 2 in May 2007. The Committee initially had ten members and a convener, subsequently reduced to seven members, a convener and deputy convener in 2003. The Convener during Session 1 was a nominee of the Liberal Democrats, the junior partner in the governing coalition. Labour as the largest group in the Parliament nominated five members in 1999 which was reduced to four in 2003. The next biggest party in the Parliament, the Scottish Nationalists nominated three members, reduced to two in 2003. The Conservatives were initially allocated two places on the Committee, reduced to one in 2003. The Committee's party membership structure continued on the same basis in Session 2, but with an SNP convener throughout. An independent member (a GP standing on a stop hospital closures platform) was also part of the Committee in Session 2.

Individual use examined

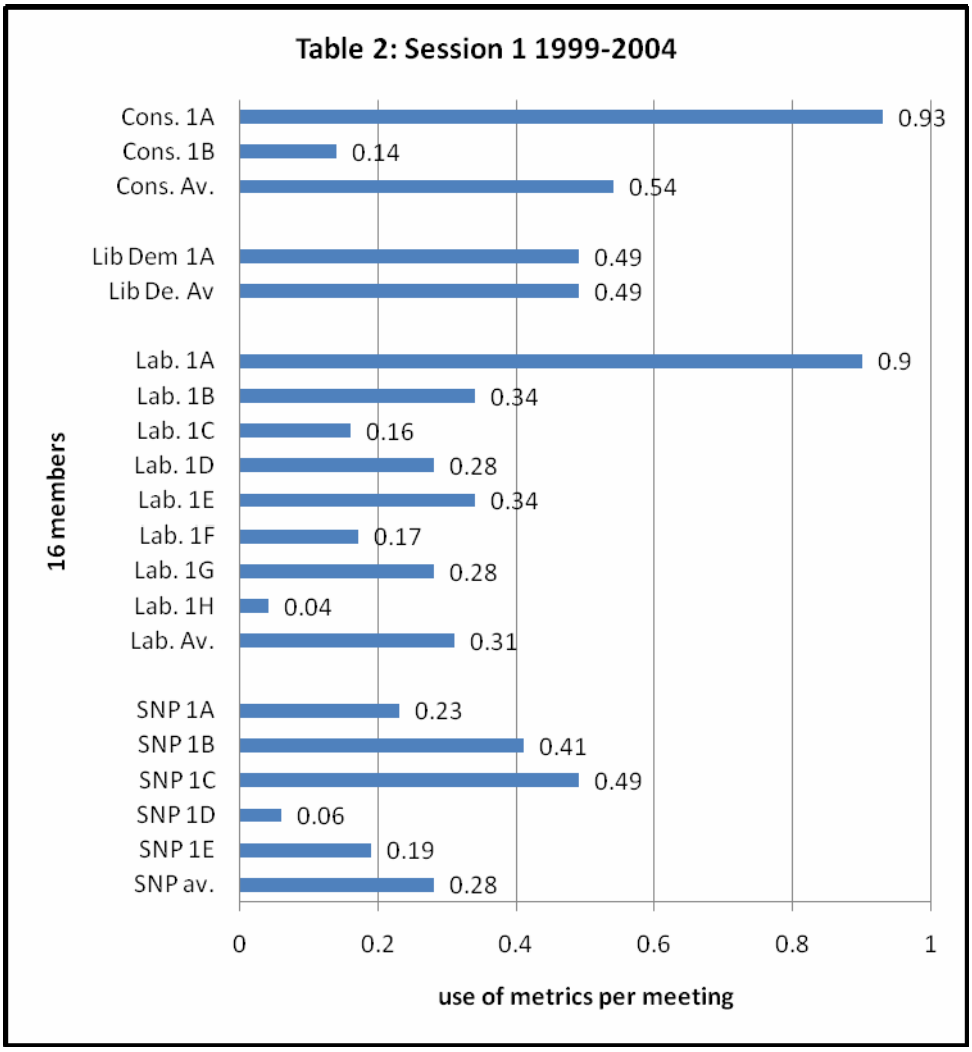
The length of Committee membership ranged from the entire four years of the relevant session to a matter of a few weeks. This presented a problem in comparing members' propensity to use performance metrics. Between1999-2007, there were 28 members of the Committee, with an average tenure of 77 meetings or slightly over two years. In a bid to provide a balanced account of user behaviour use of metrics has been calculated on a 'per-meeting' basis. Table 1 records the user record of all 28 members.

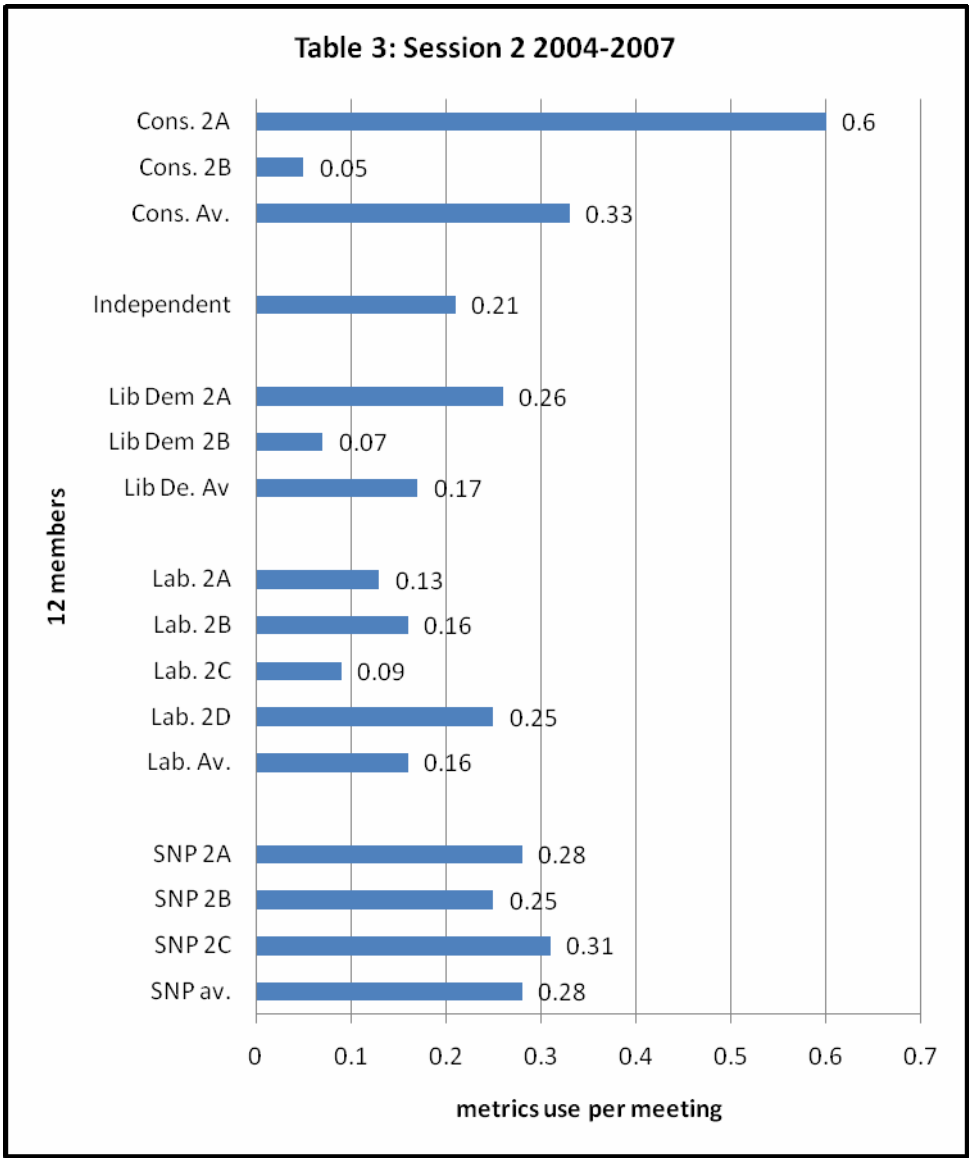


In Session 1 there were 431 recorded uses of performance metrics in 119 Committee meetings. The figure fell to 210 over the course of 113 meetings in Session 2. The data shows that the range of use by members per-meeting is high. Five members averaged less than 0.1 uses per meeting, while two members averaged between .9 and 1 uses per meeting. The inclination and/or capacity to use metrics in meetings are therefore highly varied. During Session 1, the average use of metrics by 16 members was .37 per meeting. In Session 2 the Committee had 12 members and average use fell to just .21 per meeting. The highest users were a Conservative and a Labour member who both sat on the Committee during Session 1. In attempting to understand individual user behaviour in more detail the data was examined to identify

any associations between use per meetings rates and factors such as political party, pre-parliamentary career background and length of Committee membership. (A6)

Tables 2&3 record use of metrics on a per meeting basis, identifying members according to political party and also providing the average use by members of each political party represented on the Committee. (B1&B2).





Political parties

Associations between political party and user behaviour were sought, it appearing logical to anticipate that Committee members who belonged to the political parties in the coalition government might take a less critical approach to oversight than opposition party Committee members. In Session 1 Labour members averaged .31 uses of metrics per meeting and the Liberal Democrat member averaged .49 uses per meeting. The Conservatives averaged .54 uses per meeting, which does support the 'taking it easy on your own minister' hypothesis. However, the largest opposition party the SNP averaged only .28 uses of metrics per meeting, which refutes the hypothesised association. In Session 2 the hypothesis seems to hold up rather better, with Labour members averaging only .16 uses of metrics per meeting and the Liberal Democrats only marginally better at .17. The Conservatives averaged .33 and the SNP average use remaining at .28, seemingly supporting an association between party and user behaviour along the lines forecasted. (D4)

Interviews with members confirmed the influence of partisan tactics in the use performance metrics in Committee, but also raised parliamentary experience as a factor influencing use. Only a handful of MSPs had experience of policy oversight

gained as former MPs, when they are elected to the Scottish Parliament. It is seems likely that inexperienced parliamentarians went through a learning process in which they worked out how to 'best' operate as a Committee member. What passes for an effective contribution does not necessarily require evidence in the form of performance metrics. Two of the Labour members whose use fell below the Labour average of .33 per meeting, went on to hold ministerial positions in the Health Department during Session 1, strengthening the conclusion that career minded government members avoid using metrics. One of these low scoring Committee members had previous experience as an MP. The decline in use of metrics by the Committee in Session 2 refutes any notion of a general 'enlightenment effect' through members' use of metrics. (F2)

Interviews indicated that the political parties do not differ very much in the resources they provide to Committee members through research departments. On the other hand those in the Labour Party might have been expected to have a certain degree of 'back door access' to the research and information services of the Health Department led by their ministerial office holding party colleagues. If this was the case then no evidence appears in the form of higher use of performance metrics.

Pre-parliamentary background

It is reasonable to assume that a prior knowledge of health and community care services would have some positive influence on the capacity and perhaps inclination to use metrics. Members' pre-parliament careerswere identified. Out of the 28 members, three had experience as medical practitioners. The former medical doctors averaged .39 uses per meeting, but this ranged from 0.05 to .90 per meeting, indicating that inclination and capacity to use metrics cannot be predicted by a medical background. One former medical practitioner indicated in an interview that the study of performance metrics featured heavily in their working life as a parliamentarian, while another freely admitted that they did not 'dig' very far in looking for evidence on performance. The list of members also included nurses, a pharmacist, a social worker and two community care managers. In total 11 out of 28 members had experience of the health or community care sectors. In Session 1 the 'experienced' members averaged .38 uses per meeting as against .32 by members with no health or community care career experience. In Session 2 experienced members averaged.23 uses per meeting compared to .21 by members with no experience. The conclusion is drawn that there is no association between levels of use and experience. (Objective B2)

Of the 28 members of the Committee, 22 had attended university. The six members who had no higher education averaged .19 uses per meeting as opposed to an average of .32 for the university educated. There is therefore a strong possibility that inclination and capacity to use performance metrics is positively linked to education.

Length of membership

Another possible explanation for the wide range in use of metrics is related to tenure, which ranged from 26 to 119 meetings. Over the two sessions examined, 17 of the 28 MSPs were members of the Committee for over two years. It might be anticipated that long periods of membership would allow members to learn about health policy and how to use performance metrics. In Session 1 this proved to be the case with the MSPs who were members for over two years averaging .4 uses of performance metrics and MSPs whose membership lasted less than two only averaging .27 uses of performance metrics. However this association was not repeated in Session 2 when the MSPs who were members for over two years averaged .19 uses of

performance metrics as opposed to an average .27 uses by those MSPs who were members for less than two years. There is no evidence therefore that length of tenure affects inclincation and or capacity to use performance metrics in Committee.

Trends and patterns of use

The 232 meetings examined produced data which demonstrated that the performance metrics referred to in each of the 641 recorded uses, were mostly produced by the Health Department of the Scottish Government. Performance metrics produced by bodies such NHS Quality Improvement Scotland and Audit Scotland were also used. Interventions which involved the use of performance metrics were mostly directed at government ministers, civil servants or NHS senior managers. Other witnesses such as representatives of the doctors (BMA and royal colleges), academics and interest group leaders, also frequently responded to questions which were based around metrics. (A1& A5) The Committee also frequently discussed metrics between themselves in parts of meetings when no witnesses were appearing. (E1) The content analysis captured the type of metric used in the sense of whether they referred to inputs, outputs or outcomes. However because of multiple references by different Committee members to the same set of metrics recorded, a further analytic exercise will need to be conducted in order to draw balanced conclusions as to the respective popularity of different types of metric. This is also true in relation to metrics producers. (A1) Apart from annual budget meetings there were no regularized scrutiny events in which a predictable set of metrics would be used in Committee business. (A3, E3) With the exception of those members who are recorded as high users there is little evidence of MSPs returning to the same sets of metrics on a regular basis. The same conclusion is drawn with respect to metrics which have been used in extra-parliamentary discursive forums which members may have taken part in. (D2). The subject matter which provides seems to prompt use is wide ranging. The instance of members making an intervention which relates to their constituencies is low. (D1) On a number of occasions an issue like the widely media reported prospect of a flu epidemic, appears to encourage use of metrics. (A5). Consumer choice related metrics such as this relating to referrals do not appear to have attracted particular interest. (C2)

In Session 1 2003 no metrics based interventions were made at all and data from Session 2 confirms the decreasing incidence of use. Any impact in terms of increased inclination to employ performance metrics, resulting from declining information search cost, enhanced Committee knowledge management or increased individual understanding of performance issues, appears to be outweighed by other factors. The longitudinal research design allowed an appreciation of context to be built up. It is apparent on inspection of the agenda followed by the Committee that it's dual role as legislative and oversight body creates a conflict over the time allocated to respective roles. During Session 1 seven bills were dealt with, including three where Health and Community care was acting as lead scrutiny committee. The Committee also dealt with four budget bills. Notably during 2003 Session I the Committee dealt with the Primary Medical Services (Scotland) Bill over the course of many sessions. During Session 2 thirteen bills were considered, including nine where Health and Community care acted as lead committee. Four budget bills were also considered. In 2006 a great deal of Committee time was taken up with the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Bill. The evidence suggests that the Committee is normally unable to sustain performance metrics based oversight when processing legislation. (A2 &E2)

The content analysis differentiated between different contexts of use. Firstly when a parliamentarian uses a performance metric to make a point it is of significance in suggesting that a line of evidence based reasoning is at work. Table 4. breaks this type of use down into occasions when specific data were referred to and times when a set of metrics was referred but no actual data. Initially in Session 1, usage rates are fairly steady ranging between 44 and 58 (1999 figures adjusted); however this pattern came to an abrupt halt thereafter and with the exception of 2004 a decline set in, suggesting a deteriorating capacity or inclination to use metrics.

Table 4. Incidence of metrics based interventions in Committee meetings.

Session 1	Metrics based interventions	Reference to specific data	No reference to specific data
1999	29	13	16
2000	50	23	27
2001	55	33	22
2002	44	20	24
2003	0	0	0
Total	178	89	89

Session 2	Metrics based interventions	Reference to specific data	No reference to specific data
2003	2	1	1
2004	45	22	23
2005	21	12	9
2006	13	7	6
2007	9	5	4
Total	90	47	43

Asking for sets of metrics to be provided is an important action in that it can identify parliamentarians as acknowledging that they lack sufficient evidence to address the issue in hand. The 1999 figure of five requests (Table 5.) probably reflect the novelty of tasks associated with the new parliament, with members needing time to orientate themselves to the task of oversight. In 2000 a total of 17 requests were made for information. In 2001 the number of requests was again 17. It is important to investigate the context in which requests for metrics were being made. The annual budget scrutiny process mainly took place during three meetings, which alone generated nine requests for metrics. In 2001, scrutiny of the budget process accounted for six of the 17 recorded requests for sets of metrics to be provided. However from 2004 onwards the inclination to ‘ask for more’ was in decline.

Table 5. Requests by Committee members for performance metrics to be provided.

Session 1	Ask for metrics to be provided in relation to a policy issue
1999	5
2000	17
2001	17
2002	10
2003	0
Total	49

Session 2	Ask for metrics to be provided in relation to a policy issue
2003	12
2004	11
2005	8
2006	7
2007	5
Total	43

The data collected on challenges to and requests for explanations of the basis metrics, shows remarkably high levels of activity. During Session 1 a total of 204 challenges and requests for explanations were made as against 178 metrics based interventions and correspondingly in Session 2 some 77 challenges and requests for explanation were made compared with 90 metrics based interventions. (Table 6.) Examined in context it is clear that challenges and demands for explanations are usually a means of expressing a lack of trust in the performance story being delivered by government. Expressing doubts about the integrity of performance metrics seems to be seen by members as a useful means of demonstrating effectiveness in their oversight role. In spite of being in a minority on the Committee, 103 of the 204 challenges and demands for explanation came from non-government party members of the Committee in Session 1 and 47 of the 77 challenges and explanations in Session2, came from SNP members. Interviews supported the conclusion that challenging and asking for explanations is as one interviewee put ‘all about embarrassing the government’. (D3, D4 & D5)

Table 6. Challenges to basis of metrics provided, demands for explanation and claims of inaccessibility.

Performance concepts and perspectives adopted by parliamentarians

Session 1	Challenge basis of metrics	Ask for explanation/ or claim inaccessible	Total
1999	17	29	46
2000	13	30	43
2001	26	35	61
2002	10	44	54
2003	0	0	0
Total	66	138	204

Session 2	Challenge basis of metrics	Ask for explanation/ or claim metrics inaccessible	Total
2003	2	11	13
2004	6	24	30
2005	10	7	17
2006	1	3	4
2007	2	11	13
Total	21	56	77

The Committee does not discuss specific sets of performance metrics as a separate agenda item and crucially does not routinely examine reports from either NHS Quality Improvement Scotland or Audit Scotland. (E3) Instead the Parliament's Audit Committee is obliged to examine their reports. Rules state that the Audit Committee can refer reports on to a policy committee, but in practice this seldom happens. Only two high user members were able to demonstrate that they consistently accessed reports emanating from audit agencies or sets of metrics produced annually by the Department for Health to raise issues in Committee. Most members had no clear 'favourite' sources of metrics. (A4) Metrics are frequently employed in Committee reports although caution must be exercised due to the practice of advisers drafting such documents and hence choosing metrics for inclusion. (F1)

Parliamentarians tended to adopt three basic positions in relation to metrics in the act of oversight. There are times when members behave as if they accept the conditions on which data is collected, analysed and presented. As users they make an intervention in which the performance story expressed in sets of metrics is taken at face value. On the other hand parliamentarians may demonstrate through their use of

metrics that they are still comfortable with the reporting system, but want more metrics to add to the completeness of the performance story. Alternately parliamentarians do not accept the legitimacy of the performance metrics produced by government and the NHS; instead they position themselves as 'disbelievers' and use references to performance metrics to develop a discourse of doubt. The parliamentarians examined did not align exclusively with one position instead they will generally adopt any of the three positions when it suits.

The study endorsed the decision to employ a context sensitive, longitudinal approach to data gathering which did not rely on self-reported claims by parliamentarians regarding use. Articles to be written in 2009 will further develop the analytic scheme set out in basic terms in DP0810,[3] which makes reference to institutional, economic, cognitive and knowledge management factors influencing user behaviour. The basic processes used in the study are replicable in a comparative study.

In respect of the three questions posed above (background) the following conclusions can be drawn:

4. Some high user parliamentarians are clearly completing a managerialist policy cycle, in which their metrics informed approach to oversight matches the rationalist/calculative approaches increasingly referred to in policy making and implementation. They represent the minority.
5. Performance metrics are a resource for use in the democratic process, but the instrumental purpose behind their use by parliamentarians is often highly partisan in character.
6. The use of metrics by parliamentarians relating to public services is unlikely to reverse the long term trend where power, in circumstances of policy complexity is concentrated in the executive.

For use of metrics to make a greater impact institutional and organizational changes would be required. For instance a statutory requirement for the Committee to review the reports prepared by NHS Quality Improvement Scotland and Audit Scotland. There is also a strong case for organizing training in the use of performance metrics for MSPs joining the Committee. Institutional and knowledge management reform will be discussed in the report that is sent to users.

Activities

Marnoch, G. (2008). An exploratory study of parliamentarians and their use of performance metrics. Findings to date. *ESRC Public Services Programme Annual Fellows Meeting*, (pp. 1-13). All Souls, Oxford.
Marnoch, G. (2008). Concepts of performance employed in parliamentary oversight. A study of members of the Scottish Parliament Committee1999-2007. *EGPA Annual Conference Study Group on Performance in the Public Sector* (pp. 1-34). Erasmus, Rotterdam: EGPA.
Marnoch, G. (2008). Politics by numbers? Understanding the use made of performance metrics by parliamentarians - a report on provisional findings. *ECPR Joint Sessions Workshop on Evidence Based Policy Making* (pp. 1-34). Rennes: ECPR.
Marnoch, G. (2008). The performance metrics boom, parliamentary scrutiny and evaluation. (pp. 1-21). Lisbon: European Evaluation Society.

[3] Public Services Programme DP 0810

Marnoch, G. (2008). *DP0810: A review of empirical research on politicians' behaviour as end-users of performance metrics.*

Outputs

Report for users to be published mid-February.

Impacts

It is hoped that study will influence the development of the Scottish parliament as an institution and that findings will be of interest to audit agencies in their engagement with parliamentarians.

Future Research Priorities

An immediate target is to design a comparative study on parliamentarians and their use of performance metrics. This will afford an opportunity to exploit the lessons learnt in content analysis and conceptualization of user behaviour. Discussions are taking place with colleagues in Belgium, New Zealand and Canada.